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ABSTRACT

An experiment using texts in Canadian history with French-speaking high school students is the basis for a discussion of a history-based language syllabus. If the assumption from sociolinguistic theory is correct, that the learner must be aware of the social and cultural meaning of language in order to achieve communicative competence, then a knowledge of the sociocultural background of the target language would help to train the foreign learner to recognize the social rules of language usage. Second language teaching via the medium of history might be particularly useful in Quebec where both French and English speakers need to understand cultural differences. In addition to advantages in the sociocultural order, there are cognitive advantages to the method. By reading and understanding history, the student will develop specific cognitive language skills that are implicit in the historical method, for example interpreting concepts and developing data logically and sequentially. In this way, the learner is becoming a creative and critical thinker. Some of the class activities one would use in such a method are communication activities, cognitive exercises reflecting the stages of historical writing, and grammar exercises. (AMH)

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Teaching ESL Through the Medium of History

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In the first section of this paper I relate my personal experience in using history content as a vehicle for teaching English as a second language at the secondary school level and suggest that such an approach has sound pedagogical foundations based upon the experiences of French immersion programs currently in use in the Canadian school system. In the second section, I argue that a history-based language syllabus may have significant implications for developing (a) communicative competence and (b) cognitive language skills in the foreign language learner. In the final section I discuss some ways of using history content in the classroom and suggest ways to exploit this medium in developing communicative, cognitive and grammar structured exercises.

The impetus for this paper came in part from my interest in an E.S.P. (English for Specific Purposes) approach to language teaching and from my own English second language teaching experience in Quebec secondary high schools. In the interest of making language learning a more meaningful experience for my Secondary III francophone students, I considered the possibility of designing a history-based syllabus for language learning. In designing this approach I analysed the students' needs, interests and abilities. I decided to use a secondary level English Canadian history text as source material, since these students would write government exams in this subject the following year.

Accordingly, I began to select texts for their high interest value and for the relevance of their content to government history examinations. Selections included such topics as Canada's first immigrants and their voyage across the land bridge (Beringia) joining North America to Asia, and the legends of early explorers such as the Vikings

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who were the first Europeans to discover our continent. These were excellent introductory lessons that captured the students' interest and imagination and provided a starting point for language communication. Students were encouraged to comment or ask questions in English. These excerpts did not need to be modified as they were short passages that rarely exceeded four hundred words in length. In addition, these passages usually incorporated such visual aids as maps, charts and diagrams that were used to facilitate student comprehension of these time-event descriptions. These visual aids also provided lesson variety. For example, an overhead transparency depicting Magellan's voyage was used to engage student discussion about this topic in the target language.

Difficult historical topics such as Lord Durham's Report were simplified and modified. This meant reducing or, in some instances, eliminating complete paragraphs and lengthy digressions that contained difficult vocabulary, discourse and complex grammatical structures. To simplify such topics, I rewrote the passages using known vocabulary and simpler grammatical constructions. Teacher explanations and notes in point form were useful ways to get the history content across. Other techniques employed to resolve the comprehension of difficult topics were simulation and role-playing, and problem-solving activities. For these strategies the class was divided into small groups. In a problem-solving activity they would be given the task of resolving a historical problem such as Lord Durham's Report. In a role-playing activity, they would re-enact a historical event such as Louis Riel's trial. These task type activities were, of course, stimulating and were successful strategies for promoting communication. These activities were always planned in advance and the students always had teacher-planned materials to start from. In short, if the history content had low reader interest (Lord Durham's Report), then alternate teaching strategies were employed to overcome the deficiencies in the texts.

As stated above, students were encouraged to work in pairs and groups as this facilitated discussion about the content and opened the way to communication. In some respects they were using combinations of English and French in thinking out the ideas and descriptions in the texts. There appeared to be a high frequency of language knowledge facilitation as opposed to interference in this instance, as the texts contained many concepts and vocabulary already familiar

in the mother tongue. For example, such concepts as democracy, constitution or nation were similar in both languages. Worthy of note is the fact that the English language incorporates one-third French loan words in its vocabulary, many of which are prestige words found in subjects such as law, politics and government[1]. The vocabulary found in an English history text is, therefore, semantically and phonologically similar to French. These factors were, of course, a distinct advantage in interpreting the text and understanding contextual development. The students' knowledge of the content had a direct effect in their comprehension and oral communication skills. They felt more confident about conversing in the target language as they had acquired some interests and competence.

My inquiries into the methods of the French immersion programs, especially in the social sciences, have confirmed my belief in the effectiveness of using history content as a mechanism for second language teaching. Students in the elementary and secondary levels are taking a variety of subjects in the second language and are readily adapting to this approach. The aim of these programs is to facilitate both subject-content and second language learning using a communicative method. Communication is facilitated through task-centered activities that involve student participation. The social studies are ideally structured for these types of activities. Tasks such as research, mapwork, charts, diagrams and special projects required the student to use the target language in a functional and meaningful manner. Stevens (1976) found that students learned more French in activity-centered immersion programs than in teacher-centered programs. In an activity-centered program, a student may choose a topic of his choice within a broader unit of learning suggested by the teacher and further develop his theme. This type of personal commitment and involvement helps improve the students' overall creative and cognitive skills in the process of language learning.

1. For a discussion of this topic read "The Relevance of the History of the English Language to English Teaching" by B. Mary Petrie in *SPEAQ JOURNAL* Vol. 2, No. 3, 1978.

History and Communicative Competence

Thus far I have implied that using history content will foster language communication in the ESL classroom. I now attempt to discuss the socio-cultural dimension of history content, and link it to the notion of communicative competence in an effort to analyse the implications of such a synthesis. The communicative syllabuses now in vogue stress the importance of the communicative aspects of language. Sociolinguists such as Hymes (1972:278) emphasize the socio-cultural-behavioural attributes of language. He argues that the acquisition of language is determined as much by our social experiences, needs and desires, as by our referential use of language. Language learning should be designed with a view toward understanding communicative conduct and social life. This new view of language seems to suggest that the learner must be aware of the social and cultural meaning of language in order to achieve communicative competence. The question this raises for language teachers is: How do we teach communicative competence? Paulston admits that it is very often difficult for the foreign language learner to acquire communicative competence in the artificial environment of the classroom. Paulston (1974:354) writes:

> It should be clear, then, that the implications for language teaching we can draw from the notion of communicative competence apply primarily to situations where the learners live in the country of the target language, whether they are second language speakers or foreign students.

Obviously, a knowledge of the socio-cultural background of the target language would train the foreign learner how to recognize the social rules of language usage. It is my view that, in the absence of the natural language setting, we can simulate the socio-cultural environment of the target language by utilizing history content designed curriculums as a practical means of achieving the communicative competence objectives of language learning. The British linguist H. Widdowson (1978:16) supports this opinion. He states:

> It is a common view among language teachers that they should attempt to associate the language they are learning with situations outside the classroom, to what they frequently refer to as the 'real world'... But the school is also part of the child's real world... Subjects like history, geography, general science,

art and so on draw upon the reality of the child's own experience ... this (association of history etc. and ESL) provides us with the most certain means we have of teaching the language as communication ...

In understanding and interpreting historical material, we learn about the social needs, behaviours and desires of the target culture. History is the account of human motives. It catalogues human achievements and struggles. It tells of such human feelings as love, hate, fear, suffering and ambition. History can also explain, evaluate, and define the social norms of the present age. The historian uses the examples of the past to interpret and study man's present problems. The historiographer Louis Gottschalk (1966:31) says that historians attempt to "reach generalizations that appear to be valid and provide creditable explanations of the development of contemporary events, thoughts, and institutions."

Second language teaching via the medium of history could be especially useful in Quebec where there is a real need to understand the differences among divergent cultural and linguistic groups. Quebec's bilingual heritage and multicultural character can best be appreciated when we are able to understand the historical perspectives of those who have shaped its society. The anglophone and francophone student, in particular, are in a unique position to learn not only a second language, but also a second culture. A knowledge of each other's language and culture will free Quebecers from their bonds of solitude and help create a sense of mutual respect and understanding. This approach would also remove the misapprehension associated with second language learning and enhance student motivation.

H. Douglas Brown (1980:102) says of language and behaviour: "Understanding how human beings feel and respond and believe and value is an exceedingly important aspect of a theory of second language acquisition." A knowledge of man's past experiences may help us understand man's present social behaviour and its expression through language.

History and Language Skills

The cognitivist view of language acquisition and development is based on the theory of prior conceptual development. In other words, before we put sentences together for encoding, our mind forms

concepts, or a mental image, of what we wish to communicate. If we accept the above theory to be at least partly plausible, we must develop language teaching strategies accordingly.

In addition to shaping the language learner's perception of the socio-cultural dimension (thought and behaviour) of the target language, the student will, in the process of reading and understanding history, develop specific cognitive language skills or devices implicit in the historical method. From the study of history we learn to form and interpret concepts concerning numerous topics and subjects. History develops conceptual thinking. In interpreting the history of a specific society or culture, the student gathers insights about the culture and a new set of conceptual perspectives. In addition to conceptual thinking, the study of history develops critical thinking. The reader and writer of history must be imaginative, analytical, and inquisitive. In reading history, many tasks must be performed simultaneously and the historian must be prepared to be objective and willing to cast aside any personal prejudices he may hold in favor of a more global perspective. This is what Gottschalk says of the nature of historical composition:

> History is three-dimensional. It partakes of the nature of science, art, and philosophy. As a method it follows strict rules for ascertaining verifiable facts; as exposition and narrative, it calls for imagination, literary taste, and critical standards; as interpretation of life, it demands the philosopher's insights and judgements. (1966:viii)

In writing historical narrative, the writer is concerned with accurate descriptions of the facts or events that he is recording. He must present his data in a logical and sequential manner. He must develop his theme in such a way that the reader can follow his arguments or interpretations without difficulty. At the same time he must write with imagination and flair in order to make the forgotten past interesting and meaningful in the present. A good writer of history can make the past come alive without distorting the evidence. This is what Gottschalk (1966:15) says of the historian and of his literary style:

> History is life; he who has not lived, or has lived only enough to write a doctoral dissertation, is too inexperienced with life to write good history. He knows too little of the motives and

> associations of human beings ... to transfer his experience to paper. For the historian is different from the writer of novels. Instead of living vicariously the lives of his characters, to a large extent he makes his characters live his life, since he can understand them only by comparison, or contrast with his own experience.

In this process of interaction there develops an implicit communication between reader and writer. The writer presents the factual data and develops concepts, arguments, and interpretations that involve the reader in the process. The reader of history is not a passive observer but an active participant in the historical method. This interaction is a process of relating the cognitive and affective messages in a text to the knowledge and experience of the reader. The reader, then, is developing creative and critical thinking. Observations must be made about the material that is read. Cause and effect must be related. Hypotheses, evaluations, conclusions and judgements must be formulated about the content and the author's interpretation of the evidence. The reader must seek beyond the printed page for the explanation of events and personalities that have shaped our world. It is evident that there are a variety of language skills associated with the historical method that are classified as cognitive (inferring, interpreting, hypothesizing, describing). The language teacher who is familiar with the historical method will be equipped to select and modify those texts or passages that model the specific language skills most appropriate for the students' needs.

Lesson Planning using a History ESL Model

In this section I will briefly outline some techniques for developing ESL lessons and activities when using a history content language model and suggest some possible strategies for the exploitation of this medium in the classroom. In discussing this subject, I examine three possible areas to consider when planning lessons and activities for the classroom. These are (1) communication activities, (2) cognition skills, and (3) grammar exercises.

Communication Exercises

In this paper I have suggested that a history-designed syllabus for language learning will facilitate communication in the ESL classroom. This approach would satisfy the requirements of the notional-functional or communicative methods soon to be introduced by the Quebec Ministry of Education. At the beginning of this paper I described some of the communicative type activities that could be used with a Canadian history text. These activities do not need to be elaborated here. However, it should be recalled that this approach emphasized student-centered learning because it demanded their participation and personal efforts for the realization of a successful teaching-learning situation. Activities such as role-playing, problem-solving, simulation games, dialogue improvisations and drama help create novel and stimulating lessons which can be effective and rewarding for the teacher and students.

Cognitive Exercises

These exercises, or tasks, are intended to develop comprehension reading and writing skills. The tasks reflect the stages of historical writing and thinking and can be sequenced in order of difficulty. The five phases listed below describe some possible language exercises that could be developed from history content.

Descriptive-Observation: Students are required to name or describe historical events from a written text.

Chronological Ordering: In this type of exercise, students list a series of historical events in sequential order from a text. For example, matching events with dates or periods of history.

Relating Cause and Effect: The student learns to link or relate various historical evidence and events from a sequential text or passage.

Interpreting: Students are asked to explain human motives or events and be able to reorganize patterns of historical thought and developments. Students begin to write short paragraphs describing one or more different interpretations.

Hypothesizing: The student theorizes about historical evidence and learns to form and develop independent observations and arguments

to support his point of view. This is for advanced level students and would involve well-organized composition writing.

The above cognitive exercises are structured to develop reading and writing skills in the second language learner.

Grammar Exercises

History content can also be used to exemplify, explain, and reinforce grammatical structures such as the past tenses in English. For example, the sentence, "Magellen *was looking* for a route to the Orient", could be used to explain the notion of an action continuing in the past. The interrogative pronouns *who, what, where, when, why* and *how* can also be learned from historical context. These and other aspects of grammar are modelled in the history text. It remains for the individual teacher to exploit the grammatical features inherent in historical literature.

Conclusion

The use of history content in the ESL classroom will make lessons interesting and enjoyable. History covers a wide range of topics and disciplines that deal with man in society. In studying history, we come to understand a great deal about life. Language learning will be more meaningful if it is related to man as a social being. Language learning should also be a life experience.

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BIO-DATA

Gerald Serapiglia is a graduate of McGill's Faculty of Education and has taught History and Social Sciences at the secondary level in English and French Quebec high schools and to Amerindians in Northern Ontario. More recently, Mr. Serapiglia has obtained a Diploma in second language teaching (TESL) at McGill and has become interested in designing second language programs for specific purpose. Mr. Serapiglia has also completed a course in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) at Essex University, England, and is curreatly teaching English as a second language at the university of ABDUL-AZIZ, in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.